



Federico Rodriguez

Oral History Transcription

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Interviewed by: George Garner and Valeria Chamorro

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Summary: Federico "Chico" Rodriguez was born in southern Texas. His family followed the migrant farm work trail from Texas through South Bend into Southern Michigan until his father found a year-round job on the Dodd farm in South Bend. Mr. Rodriguez then spent his days in school, and his evenings on the farm. When he graduated from Washington High School, he spent a year with the Marines serving in Vietnam. Upon his return, he became the first Latino recruited by then Mayor Miller to serve with the South Bend Fire Department. In addition to his four decades of service there, he opened Chico's Restaurant, a Mexican-American breakfast and lunch diner on the city's west side.

0:00:00 [George Garner] My name is George Garner and I am here at the Indiana University South Bend Civil Rights Heritage Center. It's March 9th, 2018, and I sit here with two people—to my left is...

[Valeria Chamorro] Valeria Chamorro.

[GG] And she's on staff here at the Center, and our esteemed guest if you can say your name please.

[Federico Rodriguez] Federico, nicknamed "Chico" Rodriguez, Junior.

[GG] Again, thank you so much for being here. So, we wanna understand your life story and your life history, so can you start that by just telling us when you were born and where?

0:00:35 [FR] Okay, I'm a... born on June 25th, 1950, I was born in McAllen, Texas. My parents were migrant workers. Mainly at the time my dad—he migrated between the Rio Grande valley... If you're not familiar with the Rio Grande valley it's the southern tip of the state of Texas which is down around the Brownsville/McAllen area.

I was born at home. I'm not a hospital baby—I'm an at home baby. I was registered as a citizen in McAllen. Back then, after you were born at home you had to take your time, dates, and etc. to practitioners or doctors or the courthouse and register your children.

[GG] Is that pretty common for... in the town you grew up, or—

0:01:25 [FR] Yes, it was very common because in them days—in fact, as far as I can remember, it went up until I was like, maybe, 13 years old in the state of Texas, or maybe in that area if you needed medical care you paid upfront. If you didn't pay upfront, you'd get the money and then you'd get the medical care. That's the way—and I... originally when I say that, I was very depressed back in those days. I had a brother that was older. That story that my mom told me—died. The reason was she didn't have money to pay to get the care that he needed and basically, he got—now as an adult I know what he got the, you know on the inside, because intestines... blow up on them and stuff like that. And whenever something minor... She ended up bringing him home in a blanket.

0:02:17 The sad thing about it was, when she brought him home, I mean picture—you can picture this in your mind easily. A rainy day. Takes her child in. My uncle dropped her off at the hospital, says, "I'll be back. I'm gonna go see if I can find some funds." He took off leaving her there alone. They

wouldn't tend her. She kept saying, "Please, take care of my child," requesting. They never did. They never took care of him, saying, "Well ma'am, you gotta pay first."

Finally, when it was too late that the child went ahead and died, they told her, "Well, your child is dead already." So, she turned around and they say, "So what do you want us to do with the child?" She says, "Nothing. Give him back to me." So, she wrapped him up in the blanket and took off walking home in the rain.

My uncle came back, seen her walking, picked her up and, "What happened?" He died. They didn't do it. We didn't have the money to pay. So, I lost a brother because of lack of care.

0:03:08 [GG] How old was he?

[FR] He was like, four years old. You know, he was like two years older than my brother—I was born 1950, that brother of mine was born 1945 is what it was, and he died in 1947 just before my other brother was born. But that was the kind of care that was happening over there. So, the majority of the people in Texas, you know, especially in the poorer kind of part of Texas which is the Rio Grande Valley, near the—the borderline was only ten miles away from McAllen, and only a mile away from the area where we lived. So, because they—we lived in that poor area, you know, medical facilities—if you had the money you got it, if you didn't have the money, you called the so-called "witch doctor" to do it. Curanderos. You probably have heard of them.

[Valeria Chamorro] Mm-hm.

0:04:01 [FR] And you know they would treat the people in the way they can. That's why all of us kids and my brothers and sisters—all but one were born at home. And the only one that was born in the hospital is my smallest sister because she was born here in South Bend. You know, she was the only one that was born in a medical facility.

[GG] How many kids total?

0:05:05 We had... My mom had a total of a dozen kids. But we had... Her first five kids died and then after that my sister... my older sister. She since has passed away also but then that my brother the one who's name is Felix he was born and lived to be three or four years old and then he died because of health issues. I had a brother and another sister and a brother older than me and then I was born and two sisters younger than me. So, there were six of us who survived and six of us who perished. She was one of

those who had them at birth and no neo natal care whatsoever so she was basically on her own. And the person that bought us into the world was basically... we called *comadres*. Just ladies that [inaudible].

Some *comadres* is a way of making yourself a relationship with another family which you probably know about that. You wanna be a part of a family—make him a *compadre* or *comadre*. How do you make him a *comadre* or *compadre*? Through baptism, religious wedding sponsorship—you become that. And then, it kind of gives you a right to yell at the kids. [laughs] If you don't behave, I'm gonna tell my *comadre* or I'm gonna tell my *compadre*, you know. You got too many eyes watching you it's hard to be a kid.

[GG] Can't get away with anything.

0:05:54 [FR] Yeah but I was born in June 25th, 1950, and like I said my dad was a migrant—he used to migrate through north... mainly northern Texas, and then he started going out of the state. When I was three years old—that's when I first migrated to South Bend. When we... I grew up in the far west side, which is Mayflower Road. You got all them farmers out there right now which, back in those days, you had Matthys farms, George Dodd's farms, Martin's farm, and Gumm's farm. Which, Gumm's farm is way over there between South Bend and North Liberty. But those were the major farms that were out there, and their crops were basically from beans, corn, mint, cabbage, onions, potatoes. And my life started on the fields. So, you know, we moved back—we were going back and forth from Texas, but because of my older sister, which her name was Melinda.

0:06:54 Because of her, because in 1953/54 we went—we were back in Texas and my mom noticed that my sister was getting into a point where she didn't know how to spell her name or write or read or nothing. And my mom said, "Well what's going on with you?" She thought she was a problem, but basically, she entered school in Texas, we moved down here for the migrant farm working, you know, between May, June—before the school close in Texas. Come over here, she starts school here, go over there, but she would never finish the school. So that going back and forth got my sister illiterate. My mom told my dad, two choices: You either stay in Texas, or we stay in Indiana, but we cannot be migrating anymore. And before my Dad used to migrate on his own, my Mom would always stay in Texas. He would come up north and do the migration.

0:07:53 How did we end up here in South Bend? Well, I had an uncle; his name was Daniel Diegos, and he used to go up to Michigan for the picking of the apples and stuff like that. So, he used to migrate a lot to Michigan. On his

way home one summer... He just happened to drive to South Bend because he used to come shopping in South Bend, but he... Somebody mentioned—some farm laborers—that they hired people, so he went out to the farm laborers and it was George Dodd farms. Got to talking over there, and he said at the time they were getting potatoes, so he says, hey, I could use people if you wanna bring them.

[GG] Do you know where in Michigan he is?

0:08:31 [FR] Up here on... not too far up in Michigan, not Berrien Springs... Honestly, I can't remember. I wanna say Coloma but I'm not 100% sure. But back in the apple orchards... and he was close to here, because he used to come shopping in South Bend. And when he went back home, he mentioned to my Dad that there was work in Indiana and he would like to bring a crew of people to come and work. So, in '52 is when we started migrating here, back, came back in '54, '55 is when we came back and stayed here, you know, as a family. My dad was able to get that through the farmer, which was George Dodd's farm. He raised all sorts of cattle and hogs, and when he raised the cattle and hogs, my dad used to, in the winter—he used to clean the corrals and stuff like that, just helping keeping all that clean. And uh—

[GG] Were there a lot of people that were able to do that work year-round or was he—

0:09:36 [FR] No, there was very few, in fact out of all the farmers down there, the only farm that had winter work was Dodd's farm because the other one was seasonal you know, usually from about April to late November. That was the seasonal—the month of December, once the snow came, farm work was over. And George Dodd, like I said, because he raised cattle and hogs, that he could only use a couple men. So basically, what he did was... there was my grandmother and her family and a couple uncles that were involved there... and a couple, two uncles of mine and my dad.

0:10:14 So, you had a total of about five people that worked the farm and what he did in order to keep them busy throughout the winter was, like, two of my uncles—or I should say three of my uncles—used to do the maintenance of the vehicles, the tractors, the trailers, you know, tear them apart and regrease them, put them back together. So, he had work for them all winter long doing the maintenance of machinery that was needed, and my dad and one other person were basically keeping the barns clean for the animals... made sure they ate, made sure they had food. They had between six to ten hours of work. When I started working there I started

working at the farm fields at about six years old, ten cents an hour, ten hours a day, five and a half days a week.

[GG] Do you know how much your father was making?

0:11:04 [FR] My dad, when he was working there, he started at 25 cents an hour and then through the years he finally got to 75 cents. But he started at 25 cents an hour, and I was grazing the trails on my hands and knees picking weeds and... geez, I worked there from 6 years old to 17 years old. School, our education, my family... In my household, there was six of us, like I said. Three of us graduated from high school and three of us were drop outs. My oldest sister, my oldest brother and my youngest sister were all drop outs.

[GG] Why did they drop out?

0:11:45 [FR] They... My brother... My mom back in those days, she kind of gave us, uh, "Either go to school or go to work, but you're not gonna stay home. You're not gonna be running the streets. Go to work or go to school." Well, my brother, he liked automobiles—in fact, his hobby was putting those automobiles that you got in boxes—

[GG] Model automobiles. I used to do those myself.

0:12:13 [FR] Really? Well, he used to do that. He was real into that. And he was in love with vehicles. And well, at 15, he got a taste of... learn how to drive and all that, so he wanted his own vehicle. The only way he could afford was to go to work. So, he chose to go to work, to drop out of school to support his vehicle. So that was his main reason. My youngest sister, she eloped. So, she eloped at 14, she dropped out of school to have babies. And uh—

[GG] Did she stay in the area?

0:12:47 [FR] Yeah, in fact it's weird because we all stayed in the area. I moved the farthest out, and I moved to Twyckenham Drive. You know, we all stayed on the west side and so my other—I had two sisters that graduated and myself. My oldest sister, of course, she was the whole cause of us staying here in Indiana because of her illiteracy. So that three that graduated, I graduated, our school that we went to—nobody seems to know about it, there was a paper article on it—it used to be called J. Elmer Peak School.

[GG] I must be honest, I haven't heard of that either, and I thought I had heard of many most of the schools that had closed.

0:13:28 [FR] J. Elmer Peak. It used right up on Locust Road, you know where [State Route] 23 and Locust is? Olive turns to Locust, it used to be—now there's a bunch of homes to the east side of the road. But back then it was all wooden area there, and there used to be a lonely brick road out there. Two rooms, two teachers, and one janitor.

[GG] Hm.

0:13:55 [FR] Mrs. Calbert was fourth, fifth, and sixth [grade] teacher, and Mrs. Broom was a first, second, and third [grade] teacher. And Mr. Galloway was our maintenance person. He was the janitor. But the weird thing about it was that every Hispanic kid in the farms—which is Mathis, George Dodd's and Martin's—all the kids used to be bused to this school. There was a total of about maybe thirty to a class—about 90 to about 200 kids total used to go there. They basically had first, second and third—two rows of first graders, two rows of second graders, two rows of third graders... And the teacher used to alternate, you know, twenty minutes for you, twenty minutes for you, and just... boom, boom, boom all day long.

[GG] And this was the South Bend community School Corporation?

0:14:46 [FR] South Bend Community School Corporation. I got a picture of the school, I just got it from a friend the other day. But one-story building, two rooms, two classrooms, two bathrooms—male and a female bathroom—and one tiny office for the principal, who was the fourth-grade teacher, and an office for the janitor, for his maintenance equipment. The width of the... Well, half of the school was a little stage and basketball court. That was our playing area. It's kinda funny because the way they controlled us was... because of the way the building was surrounded by woods.

Them teachers were smart. They scared us. They used to tell us that if we went beyond the woods that there was crazy people on the other side of the wooden area that we would... So, they put fear in us to try not to... I mean, we had freedom of the whole yard area of the school, but don't go past the wooded area because they used to scare us with the wild animal stories, you know. Snakes, Indians, that they ate people. Controlled us. Nobody ever ran into the woods or tried to run away from school.

[GG] And you said the school population was exclusively Hispanic?

0:15:59 [FR] Put it this way, it was exclusively Hispanic, it was mainly—the school was made up of mainly 90 percent Hispanics. Because the few Anglos that did go there—we didn't have no African Americans, but the few Anglos that did went there, they were... I guess as the bus was driving all

of us to school, these kids were in the way—along Prairie Avenue going... Because we used to go Mayflower to Prairie to Locust to the school. So then where the Casino ¹ is now, [there] used to be some homes in that area—about five to ten homes that had children that also... and those were the children we used to pick up.

0:16:45 Anything that the school bus driver could pick en route, you know, some... In fact, I've got a friend of mine that I just met after Peaks school because he heard me mention Peak school in one of my interviews, and he came out of the woodwork—his name was Norm. But he came out of the woodwork, and he used to live... Right now, if you go down Locust Road, it used to be—oh that street. It used to be a junk yard by Rum Village by that area. There used to be a junk yard, and this guy was, believe it or not, his house was in the middle of the junk yard. But yeah, there was many first, second, third grade... There was, give or take, maybe ten to fifteen Anglo kids and the rest were Hispanics. And both fourth, fifth, and sixth—same amount.

[GG] The Anglo kids, where they—I mean who were they? Just people who lived out—

0:17:47 [FR] They were people who lived—Anglos, I don't know. I don't like to talk in races, but they were white kids, girls mainly. They just lived... going to school. The bus rider just picked them up. Why they got sent to Peak is weird but—

[GG] That's what I'm trying to tease out.

[FR] Maybe they wanted to integrate, because all Hispanics but—(laughs). So it was reversed back then, believe it or not we were the majority. So, it was weird, so I kind of thought—and believe it or not, the majority of us that went to those schools were all Spanish speaking before we went to school. That era of kids, which is the '40s, '50s and early '60s, we went to school to learn our English. We were all Spanish kids—at home we spoke nothing but Spanish.

0:18:45 [GG] But the teachers did not speak Spanish.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] And the teachers were all Anglo.

¹ Referring to the Four Winds South Bend Casino that opened at 3000 Prairie Avenue in South Bend in January 2018.

[FR] Correct. And that was hell for—specifically me, because... How do you tell a... Do you know any Spanish at all?

[GG] Very little.

[FR] Okay I'm gonna throw one at you. Can you ask me... Can you ask me, in Spanish, that you need to go to the bathroom for a reason?

[GG] Um, I know the word *baño*. Um, that's about it. So, no I can't.

0:19:16 [FR] (laughs) Well that was me. I mean, how do I tell the teacher that I have to go "number one?" And I would stand up and she says, "What?" Back then there was yelling. Back then there was paddling. Back then you would discipline for interrupting. So, every time I stood up, "What! What!" So, I would tell my brothers, "Say something!" But none of us knew English. How do you tell a teacher that you have to go to the bathroom? That little simple... That kinda pushed me, believe it or not, that told me, this will never happen to me again. And you know, I didn't get punished. I got to the point where she actually chased me, and I thought I was gonna get a spanking for going to the bathroom just because I had to go pee. But it taught me that I gotta learn English.

[GG] So how did you learn English?

0:20:18 [FR] The English language... The way they taught us back then is, they would write the word—the lettering was in English—and like, the third graders that knew a little bit of Spanish, they would kind of assist the first graders and, you know, "This word means this." She kind of intermixed us like that. When she would see that we were having difficult time, she started, of course, with the ABC's. Gotta learn the ABC's, pronouncing of the ABC's. Then, when she started forming words, well, you know, the third graders that were a little bit more knowing how to speak the English language they would tell us, this is the way she wants you to pronounce this word. That's how we basically, within the first three grades, we would teach each other. But she would be the teacher. But then you know, those of us that didn't understand the English language—and back then they gave you the next grade more so for your age not for what you knew, but for how old you were.

0:21:24 So, if you were six, seven years old, you had to be in second grade. You'd be in second grade. They didn't care how much you knew. That was another downside of my brother who got out of school, cause he—because of his age he skipped third grade. He didn't skip it—the teachers skipped him. They put him from second to fourth grade because of his

age, which way over his head. My brother cried. He'd say, "I wanna go back to third grade." She said, "No, you're too old." So, she kinda forced him to quit. He went from fourth grade and his grades went from, you know, C's and above to C's and below in the fourth grade. In the fifth grade, he went to F's. Sixth grade he was solid F graduate. So, when he got to Wilson—which was the next school we went to—he just dropped out. So, he was like, maybe 14 or 15 years old when he dropped out of school.

0:22:29 My mom gave me the same alternatives—school or work. I chose school because I couldn't see myself... Well, I started, like I said, ten hours a day, ten cents an hour, five and a half days a week. So, I knew what to expect in the fields, but I thought to myself, do I wanna do this for the rest of my life? I was more or less always a dreamer. When—I tell them, everybody laughs at me when I tell them, believe it or not, it's a fact, the truth.

0:22:58 When I used to be out in the fields, I remember I would always want to get weed picking on my hands and knees. I'd be weed picking and I... They'd give you a row, you know, follow to pick all the way... And I used to get way up in front of the rest of the workers—way up in front. But I had a reason. My reason was that I knew that if I got out of sight—my mom at the time was the boss, she was a foreman. If I got out of her sight she wouldn't know—she knew I was working because the row would be clean, but she was always one that helped the rest and I was always the one who was like, "Heck, why am gonna help somebody else that doesn't wanna work hard, work fast?" So, I used to just lie in the dirt. Lie on my back and look at the sky and wonder—daydream, wonder—where in the heck is my life going from here?

[GG] It was a chance to be by yourself.

0:23:57 [FR] Yeah! To have just me and myself and, believe it or not, I used to do that a lot. And then when I got out to the other end, my mom used to scream at me because she—"Come and help the rest of us!" You know, we stay together. So, I would help her and that's when I would help, when they caught up with me. But then I do it and do it again. I was always one of those who was like, hurry up and do the thing then kick back and watch everybody else work.

[GG] I wanna get back to your educational career. First, I'm interested in the relationship between your father, your whole family basically and the owners of the Dodd farm. Can you speak to that interaction, relationship?

0:24:38 [FR] Well, believe it or not, my mom was the disciplinary person to us. She was—I guess everything in the hammer head and the hammer handle. My dad was more so laid back. My dad rarely got involved with our lives but—we knew he was there and my dad was always an individual that he asked you one time, he never asked you twice. He would ask us one time and if we did not obey then we got feared. And I guess the one part that I grabbed from my dad, I let my voice do the discipline. Because I like to ask you politely, “If you please,” or, you know. I don’t use the word “please” but you know, like... I was nicknamed Nuno—that was, my mom and my dad, everybody called me Nuno.

0:25:31 She goes, “Nuno, handa tarer leña.” “Go get some wood.” ‘Cause that’s what we used to live in a house—we had one furnace, we had one, two, three, four, five rooms and one furnace. Outside house. A pump outside that we had to crank up to get water to bathe, drink and cook. And when he used to send us to get that, my first... as a kid, my first response was, “ahorita.” “Wait.” Ahorita is, okay, wait. That would be the only time, then when he would stand up then his voice would “Que no te dije?!” And (whoosh noise). So, he never hit us but, “Go get wood.” Ahorita. Okay. We wouldn’t move, and he would just stand up, “Didn’t I tell you?” His voice jumped up from the go get to obey me.

[GG] What about the relationship between your father and the owners of the farm?

0:26:45 [FR] My relationship with the owners of the farm... My dad was illiterate of the group, the five—which was three of my uncles and—no, four of my uncles and my dad. He was the illiterate one. My dad understood what you were telling him in English, but he couldn’t... He had a hard time translating it back. You tell him what you needed, like... I’ll give you an example. The boss used to tell him, “Fred”—that’s what he used to call him—“Fred, I need you to go plow the fields out there in Acies.” Well, he knew where Acies was, the area, and my dad would, “Okay, what does he mean, plow?” Plow—

[GG] So he’d use hand motions

0:27:25 [FR] Yeah, and my dad would understand, you know. “I need you to calibrate,” my dad he knew what the heck he wanted to do. So, the boss, that’s how he communicated with my dad and as time progressed my dad got—was catching on to the words. My dad would say, okay, you know, when he needed the tractors to grab and all that. Relationship with the farmer... He had it good. While I would say he had it good, the farmer knew that whatever he told my dad, my dad would do.

The problem wasn't my dad but my uncles. They knew they would take advantage of everything. When they were lazy and [not] doing work, they would tell my dad, "The boss said you gotta do this," and that would be false. So, my dad's relationship with my uncles was... he didn't know when to believe and when not to believe, and that kind of put my dad up against the wall with the boss because sometimes he would tell them to tell him, other times he didn't say nothing but they would tell him to do this just 'cause they, for whatever reason... That did upset my dad.

0:28:38 [GG] So he felt that sometimes the relationship between he and your uncles may not have always been fair or not always been good. But do you think the relationship with farm owner was fair and good?

[FR] The relationship with the farm owner, it was okay. You know, put it this way... Maybe I shouldn't... It was good only because he never kicked us out of the farm. He didn't kick us out of the farm. He never got angry at my dad because he didn't do the right thing. When he got angry at anybody and everybody it was because we did the wrong things. You know, it wasn't what he wanted us to do and we went ahead and did it anyway. So, he had a good relationship with my dad I would say. My dad did get farm accidents a couple times and he took care of injuries and all that. He fell into, believe it or not, a corn grinder—my dad did. His leg. It mauled his leg up. Took care of that. And then he also... We were having the corn—that was raising the corn like an escalator, he fell in that. He fell backwards, and it wrapped him up and hurt his back terribly. He took care of him then. too.

0:29:54 He had a good relationship with the boss. The old man was old man Dodd, 'cause when the old man Dodd died then Schinder took over which was a nephew of old man Dodd. And when he got there, Arthur Schnider's famous words with Jesus Christ. I don't know why, but that was his way of—when things were not going his way he would just start with "Jesus Christ." But no, my dad's relationships with the farms was good enough to the point that we never went back to Texas. Good enough to the point that he retired at the farm.

[GG] How old was he when he retired?

0:30:39 [FR] He was in his late 60s, and in fact... I wanna say he was 68 when he retired from the farm. And then a lady that my mom knew—a *comadre* of my mom sold my mom a house—a rundown house on Chicago Street—on the 400 block of Chicago Street—and between us and my dad and my mom, we kinda went from a nasty looking home into a livable home. And then that's where they retired.

My mom and dad, when they did retire—that's one thing about [inaudible] is that when you retired, when you couldn't work anymore. You had six months to vacate that home. Because what we got back then—which was fair. We got low wages, but we didn't pay no rent. Everything was free and he, on top of that, the cabbage, you know, corn if we wanted, potatoes, he would let us have those things for free.

[GG] And that was enough to live on? More than enough to live on?

0:31:40 [FR] Enough to live on, and in fact, when we harvest the potatoes... These huge potatoes like that used to come out, and my mom used to put them aside and that's what we lived on during the winter time. A lot of potato eating, you know, a lot of cabbage eating—never knew you could eat cabbage so many different ways. (laughs) And my mom was a miracle maker with the food. The reason I say she was a miracle maker is because—I tell that to my wife now, and say, you know, the older people back in those days like my mom with one pork steak—six of us, six mouths including my dad, but with one pork steak she could grab a head of cabbage and slice it all up, put it in a frying pan, add some spices and some tomato sauce and one pork steak cut into tiny little bits just to give it flavor and beans.

[GG] What region of Mexico did you come from?

[FR] I was born in Texas, Mexico (laughs)

[GG] Sorry, what region did she come from?

0:32:36 [FR] She didn't come from... My parents both were born in the valley. My great grandpa, my grandparents were born in Mexico and they were mainly from the frontera—Reinosa you know that area which is, like I said, you jump the river and you were there.

[GG] That's what I was trying to tease out, you know, the different regions have different types of food. If there was that tradition from where—

0:32:59 [FR] Correct, yeah. My mom learned from her mom how to cook their food and that's how they did in the valley, they created—they created meals. And when you had a lot of kids because down in the valley it wasn't two or three kids, it was six or above kids. Some even had up to eighteen kids or more. So, the idea is, how do you feed so many mouths? A head of cabbage will feed a lot of people, you know. Or, she used to grab a pound of ground beef and make miracles with, you know, potatoes. When we were hard on our luck, it was just eat potatoes, pour a can of tomato sauce in there, make some homemade tortillas de harina, you know the

flour tortillas. That's what I grew up with, flour tortillas, we didn't make corn tortillas. It was too much work to make corn—you gotta go pick up the corn and then grind it and then—all just too much work. Flour. You just grab the flour and make the dough.

[GG] When you said when you were hard on your luck, so what would make it hard on your luck? Just a bad crop year or...?

0:34:12 [FR] Well, for us, the hard on our luck was... At lot of times was, what the people don't understand is that, you know—sandstorms, you ever hear of sandstorms? Well picture sandstorms—what we used to have out there, we used to have muck storms they called them. The black dirt would raise up and go up and just like a sandstorm covering me, you couldn't breathe out there, you know. So, we had muck storms that was just black dirt and we'd work in the fields. Basically, we did what the Arabs do today where we covered our faces to be able to breathe and stuff like that. You couldn't open your eyes, but you know, blinded yourself... You know those were the hard time... And then when the sun was up in the 90 degrees, in the 98 degrees.

0:35:03 I mean picture yourself the way you're dressed in 90-degree weather plus a shirt on, plus a hat on, plus a scarf, plus gloves on. I mean you covered yourself to avoid the sun burning and—but the thing is loose clothing, we learned how to use loose clothing. Not too tight because man, you couldn't stand the heat, but we prevented the sun from burning us. You know, we never had—I don't recall droughts in the farm, I don't recall any of that. Snowstorms we had a lot—the hard times also was having to heat the house with wood. Every Sunday my brother, I, and my dad and another guy, another gentlemen that lived with us, we used to have to go out into the fields—into the wood fields and basically, any tree that was down or something, we cut up wood to bring back to the house to chop it up and that was our heating source. On winter times, we used to sit around on one heater, you know, once you went to bed you made sure you had a lot of blankets—and my brother hated this.

0:36:18 I was one of those kids that didn't know how to control my kidneys. Number one, it was too cold to get up, and my brother used to always have a fit. I didn't know why. I kept him warm (laughs). So, you know, we think about that nowadays and it changes my name. But yeah, that's where the—there were hard and having to use the restroom in the outhouse and like dug a hole like maybe six feet deep and put a little shed over it, plywood, and that's what we did during necessity.

[GG] So it was the Dodd farm that provided housing for yourself and all the other employees.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] Was there a huge difference between—so where did the Dodd family live?

[FR] They lived in luxury (laughs).

[GG] Hmm.

[FR] In fact, that house still stands as of today.

[GG] Where is it?

0:37:27 [FR] Right on Mayflower Road, you know where the Mayflower Road separates? Once you pass that villages, the trailer home villages, it kinda separates. And if you go down maybe less than a half a block down the road you'll see a brick home to your left—to your right. Matthys is the one on the left side, Schneider's is the homes on the right—like a brick mansion. I don't know how many rooms it had. My mom used to clean them, and then for his nephew, he built a ranch style home right by the big house. But you can see them right off the road on the Pine Road area, but they still stand today as they were back then, and they had indoor facilities.

[GG] So there was a difference there between a house that was provided and that house—

0:38:26 [FR] Back then, to be honest with you... I remember, for example, like, mint oil. We used to harvest all the mint and bring it back and it was hard work for us laborers to have to bring it back, steam it, get the oil out the plant. And we used to drop the oil in a 55-gallon drum. Well, you go back in the '50s, '60s, let's say a 55-gallon drum back then was like 3,000 bucks for a 55-gallon drum, while he's paying us ten cents an hour, that was uh—he made a lot of money on that mint oil. As time progressed in the '60s, '70s, '80s that 3,000 barrel went to ten, fifteen, up to 30,000 when I left. So, that's how much mint oil. The bad thing about it now is that a lot of the farmers don't do the mint oil because mint is super powerful to the point that all you need is a needle pinhead to make ten packs of gum. So that's all—a needle pinhead to make ten packs of gum.

0:39:36 I don't know, I don't chew gum but, yeah, that's what they used to make. So, it was powerful enough that it was... He used to make a lot of money.

They used to make a lot of money. He used to own 1,500 acres until the state took away some of them to put the bypass. But you know, he still had a thousand acres left to harvest.

[GG] Did you get the opportunity to get off the farm to go into town much?

[FR] You know, as a kid in the '50s, when we were there I thought downtown used to be a store in the corner of Mayflower and [State Route] 23. If you can picture that area, there's a Dean's ² and a gas station, and right door was the store. I thought that was downtown. As I grew older in the early... late '50s, early '60s I found out... We started going over here on Sample Street—it's a church now—on Ford and Sample. The church now used to be a grocery store, so I thought that was downtown. And then I found out that over here on Western Avenue where that U-Haul is now, Falcon and Western, there's a U-Haul place, that used to be a store—and I thought that was downtown. And in fact, that used to be called Piggly Wiggly's. ³

0:41:04 So, we thought that was downtown, so it wasn't until mid '60s that, when I was, like, 13, 14 years old, that there's a downtown South Bend because then we moved. We came downtown. You know, Lafayette, Kroger and an old A&P store down on Main and Western? Right across the street was Western Auto, restaurants. It was a downtown. I still have my first radio that I bought on layaway, I bought it from a department store called Berr's. Not that kind of "bears" but bears but Berr's. But it was... that's when they first... stereo sound radio in those days. I paid 50 bucks for it. Doesn't sound like a lot —

[GG] Back then that was...

[FR] Especially when you're making a dollar a day (laughs) that was a lot. But I was giving 25 cents a week until I paid it off. Anyway, do you remember layaway plans? Do they still have those?

[GG] I do.

[VC] They still have them.

0:42:11 [GG] Yeah so, you said a lot right there, not just about downtown but also about the growing business around Western Avenue, around Sample, around places like that. So, your experience was grocery, you know going to get groceries...

² Dean's is an automobile service station in South Bend, Indiana.

³ Piggly Wiggly is a grocery store chain.

[FR] Going to get groceries.

[GG] What else... Do you remember anything else from around here?

[FR] Well the Western Auto's was basically our toy shop. We used to get a lot of bikes. We were into bikes back then. Bikes, bb-guns, sling shots. We used sling shots a lot. But Western Auto, that kind of supplied our necessities for automobiles, our necessities for us kids and provided us mechanics when we would take vehicles in for work. The grocery stores, they were mainly exactly that. We didn't buy much groceries, in fact groceries stores... the only thing we bought were canned goods and meats because everything else we got at the farm. The vegetables, the potatoes, onions and all that.

0:43:14 We did a lot of that with them. You know, it's kind of funny because the African Americans we got [inaudible] in the farm fields, we... My uncle used to bring the truck to the corner of Washington and Falcon street, used to park there and some African Americans used to park there and jump on the truck and go to the fields and we worked hand in hand in the fields, believe it or not. That's how we also learned how to talk English a lot as kids, because we used to hear the African Americans talk, you know, and it was so neat that my mom, that's how she learned her English, she was the foremen.

[GG] Was this still the 1950s? 1960s?

[FR] Uh, '50s, '60s...

[GG] Sure.

[FR] You know—

[GG] Mostly young African Americans I presume?

[FR] Uh—

[GG] I'm just guessing.

[FR] Yeah no, there were some young ones, but mainly young mothers.

[GG] Okay.

[FR] You know the young at about late 20s, early 30s.

[GG] Okay.

0:44:17 [FR] But they used to go to work out there with us, and a lot of our English language was learned from them. So, the African Americans technically taught us a lot of the English language while we worked hand—side by side on the fields. But my everyday—my uncle, ‘cause we would start at 7, 7 to 6 with an hour lunch. So, at 6 o’clock in the morning, he’d park for 45 minutes, go back, pick the rest of us up and head for the fields. So that—we used to get a lot of African Americans out there.

I spent a couple of my labor years... but that was one thing that was interesting in the farms and how we learned the English language, you know. But we got along really great back then. They were funny, we were funny with them. I learned my first—this is really weird, I learned to be a... The boss back then asked me if I knew how to drive stick shift. I didn’t, but he asked and the tractors were all stick shift so I figured it can’t be that much different. But I mean picture a kid—I’m short now, 5’6, but back then picture a kid maybe 4 foot tall. And I’d get on the truck and do this—

[GG] You’re leaning down to be able to reach the peddle.

0:45:38 [FR] That’s where I learned to be a low rider, you know. But yeah, just to reach. And the funny thing is because I was so short and the seat could only go up to far... My mom would be driving and there was another lady, a *comadre*, a person in the middle—I used to have three ladies in front of me, which they—I’d be driving in mud holes, I got a truck load of not cattle, humans in the back. That’s what it was, a cattle truck but we hauled the humans. People bouncing. “Consuelo! Tell your son to slow down!” So, my mom was named Consuelo. “Consuelo!” [laughs].

[GG] How many people could those trucks carry?

[FR] Well, that farmer I used to work with, we had a total of 600 hands at one time working the fields. 600 hands. Today, when I drive by that fields, I look at them and I see the ghosts—I see the people

[GG] Sure.

0:46:47 [FR] It’s hard to forget that we worked the fields and I can literally see us—see myself out there, you know it’s like time froze. And I don’t like to go by there too much because of that reason is that I see, Jesus, people that have been deceased for years now. But I see the spirits out there still working the farm, you know. And I was talking to a friend of mine the other day... It was sad times. Hard times, but adventurous times and good times. And the good times were that we all got along, we all—when we used to have, we used to have a guy, a Priest who used to bring us food

from Notre Dame. Notre Dame... I don't know if they still do it, but they used to have these, uh, food cans, that when they did—anything that was open Notre Dame could not serve, so this Priest—his name was Mr. Ritz—they used to gather all the food cans that Notre Dame could not... did not want to throw away, because they were good food! You know, green beans, you name it.

They used to bring them out to the farm hands, to us for the fields, and every Sunday he'd bring boxes of these canned goods. We gobbled the heck out of that, and we used to throw parties with them. Not parties like today, but maybe I should say community events. Because when they brought this food we all would gather in the center of the farm house on the ranch, and when we gathered there we had all this food that we could eat.

0:48:29 [GG] Music too?

[FR] Yeah somebody, never failed, somebody always had a guitar or an accordion. That's what I play, the accordion. I knew Constantine [??] you know just to keep it going.

[VC] I have a question.

[GG] Go ahead.

[VC] How did he house all 600 people? Did he house all of them?

0:48:49 [FR] Not all 600 lived on the farm. Like I said, we used to drive a truck and pick up hands. In the farm he had a total of one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight homes. And each home had two or three families, you know and with kids. Now when I talked about the 600 hands, we're talking kids too. Everybody worked. I think my grandma was the only one who stayed home.

But a lot of them used to come from outta town, or they would set up tents, you know, and... I take it back. There was maybe fifteen homes total, because all the way in the farm where we gathered to work they also had homes over there, and that's where they would set up maybe tents for extra people who didn't have somewhere to live, but they were working here. But yeah, we had a lot of people that worked there, and in fact Matthys had like maybe 3 or 400 people. Martin's had the most. They had about 800 people that worked there. I don't know where he got them, but all of Mayflower Road... Mayflower Road, believe it or not, you know where the Kankakee River is over there? Small creek now but the

Kankakee River all the way to the [State Route] 23 used to be nothing but homes. God they looked like sheds. I mean they were right—

[GG] Shacks basically.

0:50:14 [FR] Yeah, and that's where all the people Martin's used to keep... And then he had little communities set up. Schneider's was all in the ranch and the farm area and we used to go—Schneider's used to have tents from Mayflower Road all the way to Peach Road. So, we had a lot of people, you know. I mean we used to have truckloads of people come in to work with us. We had a lot of people from other farms because we would be working over there. The farmers back then also kind of alternated... Like, for example, Schneider's farm. He planted a lot of vegetables, you know the potatoes, the onions, you know. Martin Black, he was mainly into the beans, into the corns, and I think to the mint. That was Martin's, Gumm's farms. He was pretty much a mint farm, Matthys. He kinda did a little bit of what George Dodd—which became Schneider's farm after that—he did a lot of the same things George Dodd did, except Matthys didn't plant as much.

0:51:33 He had the property, but his was corn. He didn't plant very much onions, you know. It wasn't until late in life that they started doing... when Schneider's started cutting back. And then, when the people started not coming back, you know, machinery started taking over us. And when the machinery started taking over for us, a lot less people started coming back. Then what the farmers did out there was weird because Schneider's... He would harvest all his stuff—now George Dodd's farm became Schneider's farm—he would harvest all his stuff and be complete by late September, early October. And then Matthys would start up his harvesting of potatoes and onions in October to late November, December. And then Martin's would start his harvesting, 'cause he would put everything in sheds in December, January, February and March. Then you're back in the fields again. So, the same people, Schneider's, Matthys, Martin's, yeah.

[GG] And what would that do for housing then? Where would they live?

0:52:39 [FR] Well, we would stay in the same houses. Like, Schneider's didn't care because he knew he didn't have any work. So, he would say, "Anybody wants to work go to Matthys."

[GG] And it's not like the houses cost him much and there was no upkeep.

[FR] No upkeep, no running water, nothing. The only thing he had going into the house was electricity. Cause the water was well pumped and with one pump we lived off of buckets of water, drinking water, *cantaros*. You know what a *cantaro* is? Yeah, the only thing we had was electricity. A lot of our gas, like, for cooking was propane—those big long tanks was delivered there maybe once or twice a week. I think on Wednesdays and Mondays they delivered them. But that's how we lived.

That was a hard time, and then when I got out in 1968-67 when I was a junior in high school, I fell in love with the uniform of the marine corp.

0:53:49 [GG] Actually I want to pick up on that 'cause, um... Som as all this is going on, you're spending however many hours a day at school too. Starting with Peak's school, and that's PEAK?

[FR] PEAK.

[GG] Thank you.

[FR] J. Elmer Peak, PEAK.

[GG] And then that went till sixth grade.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] And then, after that, you said you went to Wilson School.

0:54:13 [FR] Then after I went to Wilson School, every school I went shut down after for some reason. Yeah. I went to Wilson 'cause they had—7th and 8th at Wilson school, but I only went there for 7th grade because they shipped us to Green Township school, so then I went to Green Junior High School for my 8th and 9th grade and then they built Jackson Middle School—which used to be a high school back then. So, when they built Jackson High school, I got kicked out of Green Township and sent to Jackson. I went to Jackson High School for one day. I didn't like it 'cause I—Jackson back then was red, yellow and green type of school.

[GG] What does that mean?

[FR] Red you're in session; yellow, transfer from room to room; green, go. So, when it turned yellow you got like 2 minutes to get to your seat. The green means you change classes. But the thing is, you had to look at the wall to see what colors were up.

[GG] So there were lights in each room?

[FR] Yeah.

[GG] That were yellow, red, and green, and then when it changed—

0:55:23 [FR] Instead of a clock you had lights: red, yellow, and green. And when the light changed yellow in the classroom that means you have five minutes before you change into the next class. When the light turned green in the classroom, go to your next class. And in the hallway, you had the same thing. You got lights, and as you're walking, if a light turns yellow you better hurry up and get to class. You got a couple minutes. So, once you got into the classroom and the light turned red, you're in session.

[GG] Was Jackson—so Green at the time, again, being on the south side, still then predominately Hispanic?

[FR] That was more mixed.

[GG] More mixed?

0:56:04 [FR] Yeah, 'cause... I don't know if you know where Green Township is? It's way out there in the farm fields. That was mainly mixed. And believe it or not, we used to have a dance hall on Mayflower Road. That dance hall couldn't have been maybe the size of my restaurant—maybe a little bit bigger, but we used to have some heck of a lot of weddings happened there. Believe it or not even our church—it seemed like a lot of the time we bounced a lot quite a bit because we started out with churches, Saint Stanislaus was way out there in New Carlisle, and then from there they built Saint Mary's Assumption. We got shipped over here to Saint Mary's Assumption, and after a few years there they sent us over here to Saint Stephen's. Up until Saint Stephen's got knocked down and they sent us to Saint Adalbert's, and now we got two churches: Saint Adalbert's and Casimir's, and that's where we're at. But those were the churches we were entitled to and the schools, J. Elmer Peak, Wilson, Green Township, Jackson High School for one day, and then I stopped at Washington... Graduated at Washington High.

[GG] This was the second Washington I presume, because there are two.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] So the second one and the current one.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] The one that's out by Western and Lombardy.

[FR] Correct.

[GG] That was probably relatively new at the time, right?

0:57:30 [FR] Well that was built... My sister was the second graduating class I wanna say. She got... I'm a '68, graduate and she got '63, so that school was about seven years old when I went.

[GG] And at the time, growing more predominantly African American as I understand as well.

[FR] Correct, and to be honest with you... I guess the Hispanic kids as a whole, the ones that were still in school, we became kind of... I have to say that we kind of started becoming the loners in high school, because we were overwhelmed by the Anglos, we were overwhelmed by the African Americans, and it wasn't the Hispanic African Americans culture anymore. It became multi-culture, and we got overrun I guess is the best way to put it. You know, those of us who stayed in school, we started focusing more in our studies instead of the groupness we used to have when we were in grade school and junior high school and even in the farm fields.

0:58:40 Unity, we started losing that unity, we started becoming individual families and we started becoming—instead of relationships, you know, with other families, close relationships, community relationships, we started going more into uh, “Oh yeah I know her, I know her, yeah I used to work with her.” But that unity, since it started dissipating... and that was a part that I think was a little bit of sadness for us. For me, it was because a lot of kids I grew up with, suddenly, they were becoming strangers to me. Acquaintances. It wasn't no more that love affair, that friendly affair, you know, that, “What you been up to?” communication, or, “How's it been for you? What you been up to?” I guess I never grew up. I didn't like that.

[GG] And then you'd go home from Washington back to the farm?

[FR] Well from Washington, after I graduated, I didn't go back to the farm.

[GG] I mean at the end of the day.

0:59:55 [FR] At the end of the day, yeah. I'd go to work at the farm. I'd work the fields, whatever was available when I got home. Change clothes, work until 6-7 o'clock. You know, so, go to school until 2, 2:30, then go to work about 3, 4 hours.

[GG] And then after doing that day after day, graduated from Washington. And then what came after that?

[FR] Then that was another downside of my life. I learned the lesson of... don't be so gullible with what you see sometimes. I fell in love with the Marine Corps outfit when the recruiters came to the school to visit, to, I guess, maybe tell us how great they were—the service was. And I thought that I asked some questions and part of the questions I asked was, “Is, you know, if I join the Marine Corps do—where am I gonna end up?” I wanted to be a military policeman. I always dreamed—one of my times that I was in the middle of the fields looking at the sky was to be a police man and—

[GG] Why a police man?

01:01:07 [FR] I don't know. I felt like, as a police man, I had strong authority. People would listen to me, you know. I would have opportunities to be able to direct, to instruct, to teach. I just—who the heck messes with somebody with a gun? But that's my reason. I thought authority was... Police men has authority and people listen to them, respect them.

[GG] Did you have a lot of interactions with police when you were young?

[FR] No. In fact, they scared the heck out of me because I tried to become a crook—tried, you know teenage kids, young farm kids we were instigated by adults and we were put to the test. Believe it or not but we had—I won't say a gang, we had a group of kids that stuck together and one of the older kids in the farm—we wanted to ride with him, we wanted to be like him because he had a vehicle. So, because he had the vehicle, he used to take us around and say hey, “Let's break into this, let's do that” you know, he instigated us in the wrong direction until couple times we came close to getting caught by the cops. I said no this life ain't for me, I was fearful of sirens and that was the end of that, I was 10 years old, you know, experimenting.

[GG] But so police were people of authority and that was something that appealed to you?

[FR] Correct.

[GG] And then that lead to when the marines would—

- 01:02:55 [FR] the Marines because I figured well, everybody listens to the marines so—I joined the marine corps in May, I got—I was only 17, I got my mother to sign my paper, but I went into what they call 120-delay action. Which after I signed—once I signed they had and I had to wait 120 days before I got put in. One of my requests when joining was you know, I wanna come home for Christmas, I wanna be home for Christmas. They said no problem, another thing I wanna be a military policeman, no problem. So, they made—they painted a perfect picture for me, I said hell yeah let me get in. Well I went to boot camp on October 3rd, 1968, I became a Hollywood marine, I went to San Diego for boot camp. They gave me 12 weeks of boot camp and then after my 12 weeks we sounded off, 1 2 3, 1 2 3 of the company, geez over a thousand guys and then they says, “All ‘1’s,’ you’re going home for Christmas, all ‘2’s,’ you’re going on kitchen duty, all ‘3’s,’ you’re going to further education.” So, then I got sent to another camp for 4 weeks of training, and then the 4 weeks of training had to deal with preparation of combat duty, which that wasn’t in my plan, I didn’t even know there was a combat going on. But then I turn around—
- 01:04:35 [GG] Do you mind if I interrupt over there because again you said this is 1968, right?
- [FR] Correct.
- [GG] And the war—
- [FR] 68 to 69.
- [GG] And the war in Vietnam is...
- [FR] Still going.
- [GG] Raging, right. Were you aware of what was happening?
- 01:04:49 [FR] I wasn’t to be honest with you because I came from the farm, news wasn’t something that we paid attention. As you can see I never said something about the news. I mean we had television, but we never paid attention to the news, what was going on in the world. We were isolated, we were on our own you know, stories or history that were going on is what we knew on the farm field. We didn’t know nothing politically, we were just nothing involved with politics, everything was just there, in our shell.
- [GG] So when the marine recruiters were recruiting you, the prospect of you going to war was not—

[FR] [both talking at once]

[GG] Of course, and that person was able to sell you on things that ended up not being true, but you didn't know what you didn't know.

01:05:43 [FR] I didn't know what I was getting into. And then I went 4 weeks of advanced combat training and then after that they told us to count off again and you know 1 2's, 1 2's and they said all 2's you're going to not kitchen duty but guard duty. And all 1s you're going on to school. So, I thought now what the heck are they sending me to school, and then I ended up another 4 weeks in artillery, that's where I lost my hearing. Artillery I was in school for 4 weeks in artillery school, that was my MOS that's what they called what you specialized in in the military, and then they sent me, gave me my transfer slips, you know to come home. January, February I came home and after my two weeks I had to report back to San Diego again, I didn't know where I was going. When I reported back to San Diego that's where I got the transfer slip that I was going to Vietnam. Where the hell is Vietnam, you know? It was —

[GG] How did your family react?

[FR] My mom...

[GG] How did they react?

[GG] How many years did you spend there?

01:08:42 [FR] I didn't—I spent down there a total of a year overseas but... it was so much activity. It was so much unbelievable things you know, all I wanted to do was survive. (pause) I apologize this is not...

[GG] No apologies necessary.

01:09:23 [FR] I'm okay, yeah just uh, flashbacks. But anyways I survived it you know, we pulled out of there and as a fact when I went up there then the good news was that after spending from March to November then they told us they were pulling the Marines out. We survived. I didn't come home, I went to Philippine islands, Taiwan, back to 'Nam then they sent me home.

[GG] When did you come home?

[FR] In March of 1967, so I spent a year over there overseas, I got my time in. It was weird times...

[GG] And when you came home what happened next?

[FR] Well when I came home, adjusting was hard for me...

[GG] For a lot of people.

[FR] Huh?

[GG] For a lot of people.

[FR] Yeah.

[GG] You were not alone.

01:10:29 [FR] Oh you know the one thing that caught me totally off guard—totally, totally off guard is that you know when I came home, we landed in San Diego or I came by route of San Francisco down to Los Angeles and San Francisco and uh got off the plane and some stupid jerk yelled at me “baby killer” you know. I was like what the hell, what do you mean by a baby killer, I didn’t know who—he was yelling directly at me because I was in uniform and he called me a baby killer and then a lady spit at me. I didn’t understand, you know what the hell.

[GG] When was this? This was once you got off the plane?

[FR] Yeah when we got back from Vietnam.

[GG] What airport do you remember?

01:11:13 [FR] I wanna say in the San Francisco area, because I came by San Francisco to LA to home. And yeah it just caught me off guard why am I being called a baby killer, who did I kill that? I didn’t know that I killed any babies. But I didn’t know that the country at the time was going through the so call Vietnam war rallies or whatever you wanna call, protesting. I didn’t get welcome home welcome and not that I expected it but when I say I I’m referring to all the Vietnam people.

All the Vietnam people, guys, we were treated more like criminals than we were as people fighting for our country. So, a lot of Vietnam, the true Vietnam person when you talk to them, we all clamped up, I clamped up, that’s why when—to be honest with you I spent maybe the last 4 years that I talked Vietnam and I never talked Vietnam since I was 20. I didn’t talk Vietnam, people asked me “were you in the war?” no, I was overseas. That’s all you got out of me.

[GG] Those wounds run deep.

01:12:29 [FR] Yeah, they do and then I just clamped up and to be honest with you I've been through a lot of counseling with the VA and that helped me to open up, not a hundred percent but it helped me. Now if I can get rid of this uh, if I can get rid of fear I want to be able—not to get sentimental when I... (pause) I can't let go, but life can continue.

[GG] Life can continue.

[FR] Yeah.

[GG] And there were a lot of great things that happened in that life.

[FR] Well yeah, after that time. I bummed around here, in fact I think I worked here for the Hansel center.

[GG] Oh yeah, so Hansel Center right across the street there

[FR] Yeah and member hood association and uh started meeting people. You know started meeting people and I shut that part of my life up.

[GG] As a lot of people had to do. Shut that part off and live and move on. Um, one of the things that you were able to do was become a prominent member of the fire department. When did that start, how did that happen?

01:14:13 [FR] Well when I got the—when I turned 21 that I came got out of the military, bummed around worked steel, uh member hood association, Hansel center, then I worked at steel warehouse then the mayor out of nowhere, mayor Miller back then called me up and my ex-wife when I was in the military she worked there and he kind of mentioned to her that he was looking for a Hispanic guy for the fire department. She said, "Well get my husband he just got out of the military." So, she called me up and I went to—

[GG] How did your ex-wife and the mayor have a connection?

[FR] She was the mail clerk...

[GG] Okay.

01:14:51 [FR] She delivered mail to the office, so she delivered mail to his office and he just asked her "hey do you know anybody Hispanic that wants to work at the fire department." She goes "no but I know a person who's looking for a job" (laughs) and that was—so he called me. She gave him

my phone number and he called me, I'm like when I went in there "No I wanna be a cop" and believe it or not when I got out I signed to become a state police, I was too short. There was a height requirement back then, you had to be at least 5'8", I was 5'7." Then I signed up for the sheriff's department, height requirement.

[GG] But not for the fire department?

[FR] But believe it or not all municipal and all public service occupations had a height requirement 5'8", you had to be at least 5'8."

[GG] I wonder why that was.

01:15:45 [FR] That was it back then. So, then I came with him, I came to him believe it or not and he says, "Go down and see this doctor." And I went there, and I'll never forget it was an old polish lady, secretary or nurse but she told me she says, "I can tell you right now you can't get on," she says, "You're too short." Like, "How do you know I'm too short? I'm here because the mayor sent me, that's all." I didn't wanna be a fireman. I wanted to be a police man and the mayor kind of convinced me, he said "Look, try as a fireman. If you don't like it, we'll see if we can transfer you into the police department." I said, "Ok. That sounds good." So, she told me to get up against the wall, she put the ruler on top of my head, she says, "Walk away. You're done. You're too short." I was 5'7" and a half.

So, I said okay, and I went home. The mayor calls me up again later on in the afternoon and says, "What happened?" I said, "I don't know the crazy nurse said I was too short." He says, "Come back here first thing in the morning," which was the next day. So, I went back there first thing in the morning at like 6 o'clock in the morning he makes a phone call to the doctor's office, I go back there, and that same nurse is there the old lady, she looks at me and she walks away from me and a younger lady, another nurse comes up. "Up against the wall." So, I got up against the wall and all I can tell you is I grew. All I know is she put the ruler then I thought the ruler went through the top of my hair only she says, "Step away," I stepped away, she says, "You're 5'8."

01:17:13 I grew you know so then she—then the doctor kind of slapped on the blood pressure cuff and this and that and you know "cough" and all this other stuff. Called the mayor and the mayor says, "Send him back to my office." Went back to the mayor's office and he says, "Congratulations you're my first Hispanic in the South Bend fire department." I'm like really? He says report to the fire chief—I had hair like you do back then.

[GG] My hair is very, very long...

[FR] Mine was down to my shoulders back then and when I walked into the office on sample street here the very first thing the fire chief said to me, he told me "you gotta cut that" eff hair. First of all, you gotta swear me in, I ain't cutting nothing until then. He said I don't want no hippies in my department. I'm like okay, so one thing lead to another, I started off here at this fire station down on Thomas street, fire station 4.

[GG] Thomas and Scott?

[FR] Correct. No, Thomas and Walnut.

[GG] Thomas and Walnut.

01:18:30 [FR] That was my first fire station, so I started there, 19—October 16. October is my month, October 3rd I went into the military and October 16 I joined the fire department. 1973. I got out of the military on October of 1970 and got in the fire department October 16, 1972.

[GG] And that started a long career with —

[FR] Uh, I wasn't planning on going this long, trust me. It's been a heck of a ride for me you know I thought it was good in the beginning there after two years, believe it or not I had two years and maybe 4 or 5 months I got promoted to a lieutenant. Then again, I go back to my time where I used to lie on my back and look at the blue sky and say, "I wonder where I'm going." When—I had a friend of mine whose name was Frank Black, he was gonna be promoted to a lieutenant but when he went for the lieutenancy at the time the only thing the chief had was a lieutenant in the investigation bureau. He said "I don't wanna be no damn investigator" so he, the chief back then said "well what do I do now? I need a lieutenant in the investigation" he said, "Well, take Chico." "But he doesn't have his time in."

01:19:42 Again, I was probably too short, he said he thought "no he has two years in" cause you had to have at least two years to be promoted. So, he called me in and talked to me and said, "Well, how do you like about coming in to work at eight hours?" I mean two years and two months and already talking about working eight hours, I said "I'm good." He says, "Okay, I'm gonna put you in investigation, gonna promote you to lieutenant and then I'll bring you in." He promoted me, but the battalion chiefs back then didn't wanna cut me loose because I did such a good job with them working on the fire suppression that they didn't wanna lose a good fire fighter.

So, I became a lieutenant of the investigation bureau, but I was working the rigs. I never got put on as an investigator, but then they transferred my badge from a lieutenant, from a lieutenant investigator to just a lieutenant and then they wanted to eliminate all the lieutenants so instead of demoting us they made us all captains. So, my career in like the first five years captain already.

[GG] Why do you think Mayor Miller was looking to bring more Latinos, more Hispanics to the—was, let me actually ask this question. Was the fire department the only place that you know that he was looking for?

01:21:00 [FR] He only had—yes at the time because he didn't have no Latinos at the fire department, zero. He already had one in the police department, which was Tony Garcia and the county police had already one because Juan Rodriguez and state police I don't know if there was any state police Hispanics or not but here locally Juan, Tony and myself, we were the first pioneers for our agencies. On the street department though there were quite a few Hispanics working on there, parks department part timers 8working there already. So, career people we didn't have, we were the first and that's why we got into it, you know when he gave it to me I think that back then the mayor wanted to fill the spot to say, "I have Latinos."

[GG] Check that box.

[FR] Our population back then was all in the west side you know so I guess I was a minority.

[GG] And at that time you were the only Hispanic person in the fire department too. So, can you speak to the interactions between you and—yeah speak to the interactions between you and the rest of the... and your colleagues.

01:22:12 [FR] To be honest with you when I—I had it rough, I had it rough because when I got on the fire department there was a lot of polish people, a lot of polish guys, all polish guys. They were tough, they were tough, I have to admit that. Too bad there were no discrimination lawsuits back then I'd be a rich man with all the discrimination law suits id be super rich, but they were tough.

[GG] What would they do?

[FR] They from being a "spic" to being a "greaser" to being a "grease monkey" to being a Mexican to being a "go back to the other side of the river" you know, "Why are you taking a position away from us?" You name it, any slur that you can think of I went through it with them, I went through

it with them. It if wasn't for a friend of mine—well one of the captains in fact I had two captains, Ryback and P (??) were my first two officers, if it wasn't for them I would have given them a finger and walked out you know, because that's how bad it was.

[GG] You were holding up your pinky and imaging another finger (laughs)

01:23:23 [FR] Yeah these two guys they kinda told me and there was an old African American guy and his name was Chip Sanders, Robert Sanders, he too told me, he says, "You can walk away—you can run away, or you can stand up. If you stand up they'll leave you alone if you walk away they're gonna hound you for the rest of your life." And I said well how do I stand up to all these people. Number one I don't even know who the hell they are, number two what did I do to them that they hate me so much?

[GG] Nothing.

[FR] Nothing, yeah Sanders was the one that told me, "You're a Hispanic, you're the first Latino that's why." I said okay that wasn't my fault, that was my parents' fault. If I had been born white and rich I wouldn't be here, you know that's my parents' fault. And so, he told me "no, stand up to them" and believe it or not I did that to—his name was Joe Waniki (??) and he was the one. He got under your skin, and not only mine everyone's even Chip's skin, but he was one individual, but he was nicknamed "the frog" that's what the other guys—his people called him. And I say his people because they were white people, and they could call him frog but nobody else could call him frog, other cultures.

01:24:49 And he got to me one day, he got to me, I told myself "I'm either gonna get fired right here or I'm gonna put him in his place" and he started with the old greaser, the old wetback, the spick and I stood up and I went up to him. I didn't punch him, but I stood face to face and I said, "You big fat frog, why don't you get your fat butt out of that chair, stand up to me, you really wanna call me these names, stand up and call me those names." I said, "You're big and huge but I can guarantee you, you are gonna feel some pain, that I will guarantee." My military skills started coming out, my you know everything he never stood up, and I literally called him from every name you could think of racially to the bottom of the poll it, you know saying how he was nothing but white trash and this and that.

I stood up to him, he didn't talk to me for 8 months after that and we had lockers side by side. (laughs) didn't talk to me for 8 months, 8 months and we rode the ring together, but I have to give him credit, as bad as he was I give him one great point. When we fought fires, he didn't abandon me, he

didn't push me, he didn't do—we worked side by side fighting, but he wouldn't talk to me. He wouldn't talk to me and then after those 8 months he mellowed out and I guess he got tired of waiting for me to talk to him and he started talking to me. Then we started conversing but that put a stop to it.

01:26:37 [GG] At what point did you not become the only Hispanic in the fire department? Who became the second? Or—

[FR] The second firemen was uh, let's see I got on in 72', next one came on in 76.

[GG] That was four years.

[FR] Yeah four years, but I broke the ice, I broke the ice with the polish people there. Everybody after me they were expected to be me, I guess I laid the groundwork and to be honest with you, like I said back in my childhood days that I used to hurry up and get up on front just to get time to myself, that's the kind of worker I am. If I'm given a project, I hurry up and do it and then I—which is good and its bad. The good thing is that you get your projects and you get a pat on the back and you get ahead of (inaudible) the bad thing about it is that then you're told to help others. Like my mother used to tell me.

[GG] Or they give you more projects.

01:27:32 [FR] Or they give you more projects. I mean that's one of the benefits of my chief right now is that I have some benefit is that when he assigns I complete. Sometimes I complete ahead of the others and he says, "I hate to do it but you know I kinda have to tell you why don't you go help so and so complete his?" But that doesn't bring it to my head that maybe I need to slow it up, but I'm one of those that's like "give me a project" at first, I scratch my head like "how the hell does he expect me to do that" but I look for ways. I've always been an individual that "what's the fastest way to get from point A to point B" straight line, right? You know that's how it's always been, straight line.

But what if that point B is off center and you have to go around obstacles and to me, I feel like that's a challenge because if I have to go around obstacles, you're challenging me. And when you're challenging me, and I feel like ok, and I got back to my military style you know skills and then you gotta find a way. I tell my employees—those peers that are under me, I always tell them, I says, "Here's the project, here's the place we gotta get

to, here's what we gotta do. I don't care how you get there, just get there." I don't care if you have to walk, ride, fly, get there.

01:29:01 [GG] And I see on your name badge assistant chief, so you clearly rose through the ranks to have a lot of people—so now you're in a position to help others too. So, talk about some of the chiefs that you worked with too, I'm thinking in particular Chief Taylor—one of the first African Americans.

[FR] Chief Taylor was the first African American chief—he was the chief you had, oh what the heck was his name. Chief Taylor, before—you had another chief who was the assistant fire prevention. When I got a Williams, he was basically the first chief that got promoted to fire prevention. Chief Taylor was a great chief, he was the longest chief. Ah you know, I guess looking back in years I wonder why chief Taylor didn't promote me a lot sooner than when he could have. But chief Taylor was fair, I just feel that he promoted a lot of African Americans while he was in there. There are those that he could, I think that there was room for him to promote, one of the Hispanics, whether it was me or another one, but it seemed like it took him until the late part of his career or his term as fire chief to do any of those promotions.

01:30:25 He ended up promoting me—to be honest with you I wonder if it was him or not, you know what I feel got me promoted? It's kinda weird and it's funny but Mayor Luecke, because I got promoted like I told you, two years and months into a lieutenant, 5 years I was a captain, 26 years later it took me to get promoted to battalion chief. Not for a lack of trying, I tried five times, just somebody else always got it, you know either a polish guy or an African American guy got it. So, I'll never forget the—I was uh, we were at the county city building and chief Luecke, not chief but Mayor Luecke was a councilman of the first district and we were negotiating, we were negotiating the contract, I was on the negotiating team.

We took a break and we went to the restroom and were pulled into those little stalls where you urinate and all that and we're standing there and he's a tall guy and I'm a short guy and we're—believe it or not this is actual fact, we're looking, I looked up at him and said “hey, I hear you're gonna be our next mayor.” That's when Joe Kernan was getting ready to go down state, he says, “Yeah, in your dreams Chico.” I says, “Well, just for your information in my dreams if you do make it,” I says, “Don't forget my name, Chico Rodriguez when the next promotion comes up to bat.” That's all I told him, “Don't forget my name, Chico Rodriguez,” and I go, “By the way, you're taller than me.” (laughs)

01:32:06 So that was it, and you know what history happened after him, he got—and believe it or not the first promotion in the fire department was me. He remembered my name.

[GG] He remembered your name.

[FR] He remembered my name and that's kinda funny because even though Luther Taylor he called me up and said, "Oh, by the way, you've been selected, you earned it, you've been selected to be a battalion chief." Was it you or was it Mayor Luecke? So, I don't know if it was my instigating of Luecke or what, but I didn't get it five times under Taylor and I got it one time just by going to urinate next to the Mayor (laughs) That's the way I look at it, and he was taller than me.

[GG] He is a tall man.

01:32:49 [FR] Mhm. And yeah that's how I got to my battalion chief and then after that this position again I tried—I don't know, would you blame me, would you blame the system? My big mouth got me to the point that I told—I applied under Howard Buchanan and I told a friend of mine—Chip Sanders, the one I told you that gave me the guidance to stand up to—his son, we, him and I were partners we were riding together as battalion chief. So, I told him, "By the way, I'm gonna put in for the fire prevention." He says, "Well what do you know about fire prevention" I says, "Nothing but what the hell, it's just an office job and I can learn it. You know I noticed on the requirements It doesn't say you must know this—you must attain this." I says, "Well I can attain anything if I'm here in the time." So, he started thinking about it and then he put in for it.

01:33:48 Well Howard, I mean, Howard's a great friend of mine, great buddy of mine now that—but my only thing is that if I put in for it he was aware that I wanted it and I was the only one. Sanders came in at the last second, a day before and Sanders gets it and he tells me that the only reason I didn't get it is because I used the word 'Damn'. I was like when did I use the word 'damn'? He says, "When you were doing your interview you used the word 'damn' in one of your sentences." I'm like well what's 'damn', was I talking about a river dam, a beaver dam? What the hell, what kind of—he says, "Well, I'm a very religious person, I don't like cussing." Well I didn't know it was a cuss word, which I didn't, I didn't know the word "damn" was a cuss word. You know, so I say, "Is that the reason I'm not getting it?" he says, "Well that's, I'm gonna give it so Sanders."

[GG] You made it eventually under Mayor Luecke, um, but then and now my understanding is that there's still not a lot of Latinos on the fire

department or on the police department. In your experience is that still a significant challenge?

01:35:00 [FR] You know, that's a challenge and its more so now. Its more so now because number one, we as Latinos and you probably, you're Latina, right?

[VC] Mhm.

[FR] Okay. We as Latinos - did you go get an education to get a job or to get an education to get a career that you study for...

[VC] The second one, to get a career that I studied for.

[GG] And you went to college for that.

[VC] Yeah.

[GG] And you graduated.

[FR] That's what we Latinos do, if we going to school, if I'm gonna get a college degree I'm gonna study for something that—the South Bend fire department, South Bend police department, they're great careers. They're careers for people that want to make something of themselves from a young age to old age but right now where our departments have become educational. Now, if we as Latinos if I'm gonna go to school, do I want a job that I gotta go to work or do I want a job where I'm gonna use my mind? And if I'm going to college I'm gonna go this route, my mind. Why put my back to work, and that's where I feel like within the agency the departments we're having a problem getting Latinos to go in because you basically gotta have at least two years of college to even make it in let alone—even though they say all you need is a high school equivalent.

01:36:39 Most of the guys that were getting in have college prep stuff you know. Why did they drop out of college? For many reasons you know from not enough funds, so the coming in are at least two years of college education, we Latino's—if I got two years of college I can guarantee you that I'm gonna go four years because what's two more? We don't take step backwards we take step forwards, you know, that's the Latino culture. And I feel like these agencies these departments they have made the curriculums out of reach—not, I wouldn't say out of reach, well the high school guy they did.

For the guy with two years, what am I gonna do that when I can use my mind? And that's where I think we're having the problems getting the

Latinos in the department is that the study guides, like I said you need at least two years of college.

[GG] Speaking of politics, you—there's an article in the *South Bend Tribune*, you mentioned you were once interested in running for the 6th district county council.

[FR] I ran.

[GG] You ran? Tell us about that. When was this?

[FR] Oh geez, I still got souvenirs I wanna show you real quick.

[GG] Pulling out a comb and it says, "Freddie Rodriguez, Council At-Large, Democrat"

01:38:11 [FR] (laughs) That was about oh god 20 years ago maybe. Uh, I was again, uh, in one of those situations that—one thing that we Latinos have also is we have—sometimes we let envy, I guess is the word I wanna use get in their way. How can she be better than me? You know, but if she wants to be like me, I'm gonna show her but I'm not gonna train her like me, she'll take my position. I guess is the best way of putting it, we seem to not want to share knowledge and if we have knowledge well I'm gonna use it for my benefit I ain't gonna use it to help you get your benefit.

I don't know what it is, I guess *envidia* is the best way to put it. When I ran for councilmen I was really interested, there was 13 of us running for the 6th district. And in fact, one of the things that atta boy, I can pat myself on is that John Broden, the judge now, you know him? Him and I we were together, and you should have seen us back then. Talk about a cat that was nervous as hell, he was running for councilmen also but there were three positions for councilmen and there were 13 of us. And we went to a public meeting over here at training center on Notre Dame Ave that used to be a Kroger's and now it's a learning center or something out there.

01:39:48 But we went out there and he was sitting next to me and he was nervous. And again, the person I am, I'm one of those that's like my knowledge here's my knowledge I'll share it with you, if it works for you better, good for you. So, he's sitting next to me, he says, "Chico, I don't think I can do this," and I says, "Well why'd the hell you sign up for, why did you sign up to run?" He goes, "Well I wanna go into the political field but I don't know if I can do that." I says, "You know what?" What's his name? Broden? Joe Broden?

[GG] Joe Broden I think is the wife of Tom Broden, is that who you're talking about?

[FR] Is that the one who's the judge right now?

[GG] He's currently a judge, yes.

[FR] Joe or Tom?

[GG] I think his name is Tom and I believe he's married to Joe—Joe also now sits on the council. I might be getting their relationship...

[FR] The wife sits on the Council.

[GG] Yup.

01:40:40 [FR] Her—the judge, he's the one that was running, so I told him "you know what, we're running for council" I says, "All you gotta do when they ask me a question they're probably gonna ask you the same damn question, compete with me." I says, "Whatever I answer, you answer better than me. That's all you gotta remember, tell them what you think they wanna hear." I says, "Don't forget we politicians we lie about everything, our goal is to get in, or tell them if you elect me once I get in I'll see what I can do, I'll look into it. If you get in." So yeah, I find it kinda funny because I eased him, I relaxed him and that son of a gun, he went on to be state representative, he—now he's a judge. And look at me—I'm still thinking about the time I ran.

01:41:31 But no, when I ran for politics I—there were some community leaders back then that they called themselves community leaders to the point that, for some ungodly reason I don't know why, and I never asked them, but I figured oh well—they went against me. They put up a guy to run against me who wasn't even a legal resident, they just kinda threw a banana peel out there instead of throwing the whole banana, at least I could have eaten the damn banana.

They threw a banana peel out there into the political arena just, so he could uh, map me out I guess. Instead of supporting me they went against me, and you know they were active people they were only active because they were union members. They were union members for local five and because they were union members—I ran in the 6th district but I ran for at-large which I had the whole city. But no, I did really really good I thought for third year, out of the three spots of top three would get and I was number 7 and I did it all on my own.

[GG] But you never ran again?

01:42:46 [FR] No, I never—that was just uh you know one of those that was “let me try it and see if I succeed” and when I noticed that my own community didn’t want to support me, for what reason, now to be honest with you to this day I have no knowledge at least—I know who they are, the three that were involved you know. But, and I know the guy they put up against me, we’re friends and I even asked, I asked him, I says, “How did you let yourself be instigated by people who embarrassed you that way”, I felt like, I felt sorry for him because he felt embarrassed he was put in, I guess the frying pan and he had no idea what the hell they were cooking.

But, a learning experience for me was you know I got involved with politics, and I’ve been involved with politics, geez from uh, from the day I joined the fire department. I hooked up with people that were, they supported a lot of different people, you know a lot of different mayors and—with Jasinski (??) when he ran with Joe Kernan or Roger Parent, he came within 34 votes of winning and being a chief. You know I’ve had my opportunities and when I’ve had them I passed them up and I kinda just had patience, I’m one of those where I figure “I didn’t succeed but I didn’t lose because I’m still here and I got more opportunities.”

[GG] And one of those opportunities was deciding to open a restaurant.

[FR] Yeah.

01:44:13 [GG] Tell us about—I mean how did that come about? What made you decide that?

[FR] Well, the business came about—I was—I’m a good listener too—the kind of guys who are always saying, every time I cook at the fire station and then my mom ran a small catering business so every time I cooked at the fire station I got “you gotta open up a restaurant.” My only thought was, if I ever open up a restaurant it’s gotta be on the west side, it’s gotta be on the west side. So, one day I was coming home from the fire station 7 up there on the north west side and I just happened to go by that restaurant which used to be called “8 reasons” and I see a for sale sign.

01:44:54 I made a u-turn, went in there and talked to the lady and says, “Hey, you’re selling?” And she says, “Yeah.” She started telling me what she was asking and all that, I mean you know, 21 years ago what she was asking—it was in the ‘70s. And I’m like who in the hell am I—I’m lucky I had a thousand dollars in my savings account and she wanted 70. But anyway, I asked why, and she said she was, and I kept noticing that the

store, that the restaurant was there. Then I talked to a friend of mine when who is Rueben Cavaso who is a manager over here at first source bank on Lombardy and Western and I says to him about the restaurant and he says, "Go ahead and apply for it", I says, "Well I don't know what the hell do even do."

He says, "Well first of all, I'm gonna have you talk to the vice president of First Source bank so if we can get you financed." I said, "Oh okay." So, we met and sat down in Rueben's office and he asked me, he says, "Chico, so I hear you wanna open up a restaurant." I says, "Yeah, I'm interested, Ruben mentioned to me that I should talk to you about it." He says, "Well, before I even say another word, do you realize that 9 out of 10 restaurants close up within the first year?" 9 out of 10. He says, "What makes you think you're gonna succeed?" I'm like, "I picture every business and every restaurant that people wanna go in, I picture that people come into to that point in time where they come out this cliff and they look down the cliff and see the word business people have the tendency to say, hey I'm gonna go into that business so they dive in."

01:46:54 I says, "So they dive into the word business, sometimes you succeed sometimes you don't." I says, "But this man, I come into the cliff I'm looking down, I see the word business and I'm like hmm, I'm coming down off that cliff, I came down that cliff and I lifted the word business to see what the hells underneath it. Climb back up that cliff and then," I says, "Now I'm gonna dive into this business." So, then I asked him, I says, "What happens when you dive into any body of water even the ocean?" You sink. "What?" You sink. I says, "Now, what does every body of water have in common? No matter how deep you sink, you got a bottom." So, I says, "This is why I'm gonna succeed, I know one thing that when I dive into that word business, I'm gonna sink, every business you go into that's the first thing you do, and everybody tells you that you sink."

I says, "But now I know that there's a bottom to this pit of water, when I get to that bottom I'm gonna put both of my legs together, I'm gonna bend them, push myself up." I says, "When my head comes up above water, which every business that you go into, you gotta come up—you gotta break even after about 4 or 5 years in order for you to even succeed." I said, "Once my head comes up above water now I know I succeeded," I says, "because I'm a damn good swimmer." He threw an application at me, he says, "Fill this damn thing we're gonna support you." That was twenty-one years ago.

01:48:46 [GG] And of course nobody does that alone, right? So, because I'm thinking you're both doing this full-time job as—fire department but also, who was helping you in the business?

[FR] My wife Angelica is my co-partner and uh, she came in there as an employee. To be honest with you, I was already married when I opened the restaurant but my wife previous—ex-wife, she couldn't take it. She felt stressed out, she felt too much and that was like three years into the business you know. So, things were not working out between her and I to the point that she wanted out, and not only she wanted out of the restaurant she wanted out of my life too. So, I said okay and about the time she went out, Angelica came in and I hired her with zero knowledge of English. Zero.

01:49:45 So, I told her, I says, "You wanna work?" she says, "Yeah." "you're gonna be my waitress." She says, "Well, I don't know no English." I says, "Don't worry, you wanna work?" I says, "The question, do you wanna work?" "Yeah." I says, "Then I'm gonna hire you." She says, "But I don't know no English." "DO YOU WANT TO WORK?" And so, we went around about four times for that question, and when she said yes, I said okay you're hired. So, then I grabbed my menu, I says, and I started with the first three things on my menu, I read them out and I said, "Pronounce them." She read them out, I said, "Pronounce them," I said, "Go home, study them three words." So, basically what I did was I taught her the menu.

She learned every item on the menu, how to pronounce them and everything and the cost. I says, "Now I wanna show you how to ask so that—I'm taking vacation time to do all this to try to train, and I had other people working with me at the time, this was in the beginning. Cause I was two years in then and then I taught her, after I taught her the menu I says, "When the phone rings you say, 'Chico's restaurant'." I says, "Now the other person's gonna—that calling in orders so listen to what they're calling, put the menu in front of you and whatever they're mentioning write down and if they ask you how much, you say 'come on in and I'll give you the price, I'm busy right now, if you wanna order I'll give you the price when you come in'." So, she was able to do that, that's how she started.

[GG] Mhm.

01:51:15 [FR] That's how she started, basically learning the menu, how to answer the phone, learning the menu, how to answer the phone. After a couple years of that then I started moving her to—I says, "Now go converse with the people." You know, she says, "Well what do I say to them?" I said, "Well you know, welcome to Chico's," and you know, "How are you

doing?” If you don’t understand what they’re saying, just say ok and smile, laugh and walk away.” You know, I said, “It works.” And then she took some classes at Hamilton and La Casa de Amistad, she took some maintenance classes and she just went biting a little bit at a time to where she got now.

Now she claims she’s boss (laughs). But you know what the heck she’s running it since (inaudible), one thing I’m super proud of her, I’m super proud of her since she’s been there with me for 18 years and believe it or not. I wanna say 2003 maybe or—when we had talked about her second year she became a so-called food server registered person, which every restaurant needs to have one and we’ve had nothing but perfections ever since then. I mean, my restaurant is one of the very few if not the way on top that on the yearly basis we get perfection on the health department inspections. And you can see them all—go back into the years and they used to inspect us four times a year then it dropped down to three times a year, then it dropped to two times a year. Why I’m super proud of her right now is the last inspection we had was last year in February, this is March, a year and one month later, they came the other day and another perfection. So, it doesn’t matter when they pop in there (laughs).

[GG] Its gonna be perfection.

01:53:01 [FR] And I told her, I said, “That I have to compliment you,” because everything is routine, everything is the same.

[GG] She runs it perfectly.

[FR] She runs it perfectly and she takes pride in what she does you know and that to me is like wow, not many restaurants can say that. Doesn’t matter if you come to my place a year later it’s gonna be as clean as it was last year when you came.

[GG] Um, so I just wanna finish on talking about the transition on the neighborhood surrounding Chico’s, Chico’s is right on the corner of western Ave and olive. Um, in an area of town that had started as predominantly polish and when you went to some of the grocery stores in the 1950s 1960s still predominantly Polish but growing into becoming a majority Latinx neighborhood. So, Chico’s restaurant was not the first but—right? You weren’t the first—

[FR] Hispanic...

[GG] Latino business early on, yeah when —

[FR] Correct.

[GG] Yeah, I just wanted to talk about that transition where—talk to me about that transition.

01:54:13 [FR] Well, after I opened up 21 years ago before that there was other restaurants but that vice president from first source was correct when he says that restaurants don't last very long. One thing I've learned about the restaurant business is that you gotta be patient, you gotta reinvest things, you know you cannot make money and run out and go out and spend it. You gotta dedicate yourself, I've had two vacations in 21 years because of the restaurant. It's like raising a child, you don't have time to do nothing you know and you have to dedicate yourself to it. I have been working pretty much out of the year, there's 52 weeks I bet I work maybe 48 weeks constantly, 7 days a week between the fire department and the restaurant.

Uh, in that area the first ones that opened up pretty much—I don't know taqueria Chicago, if they were before me or after me but we were pretty close to each other and when I opened up they kinda went. But my catering is in south west Texas, that's the best way to put it. I tell people, I says, "My food is not—" The word authentic, everyone wants to use the word authentic and I'm like, what is authentic anyways, what does that mean? Does that mean that your way of cooking is better than my way of cooking? Or does that mean that you make authentic food according to your name? I make authentic food according to Rodriguez and he makes authentic food according to Garcia and so forth, so forth, so forth.

01:55:52 So, to me I don't like to use the word authentic, I make homemade food, that's my ambience. I say I make Chicano food and my slogan or my statement is I make your Mexican taco as well as your American hot dog. That's why I labeled it Mexican American because if you want a taco I can give you a taco, you know, is it gonna be a Mexican taco? Well I don't know what's a Mexican taco? You got hundreds of states in Mexico.

[GG] Right, there's a lot of different Mexican tacos (laughs) which one?

[FR] Yeah, which one? So, to me it's like no, so I serve Chico's Mexican American food, to knowledge of advice, I like taking advice. If you give me an advice I digest it and I figure if it's got the right flavor I use it and I got advice from a friend of mine 21 years ago when I was getting ready to open up. The question was, "What are you gonna name it?" I said, "I don't know. I haven't really thought about it, but I'll come up with something." He said, "Well, before you make that decision, think about this." He says, "Don't be putting a name on that nobody can pronounce." So, then I said,

“Well what do you recommend?” He said, “Well, let me think about it. All the famous restaurants—McDonalds, Burger King, Kentucky [Fried Chicken], Long John’s. What do you know about the pattern of all those restaurants? One name or two at the most. Easy to remember.” I said, “Oh. What do you suggest?” “Name it Chico’s. Everybody knows you as Chico, name it Chico’s.”

01:57:39 [GG] That’s interesting that he’s suggesting that because again, you’re in the middle of this transitional time period for the neighborhood so you still have a strong Polish American contingency there that—(both speaking)

[FR] It was the Polish people that named me Chico when I got in the fire department 46 years ago. They wanted this friend of mine, he’s someone that told me, he says, “What’s your name?” I go, “Well in the streets they call me Freddie.” He says, “That sounds like a sissy name.” I said well, he says, “What other name?” I said, “Well don’t call me Fred or Fredrick, I hate that name.”

[GG] And you were much too old for a new one at that point.

01:58:23 [FR] (laughs) So then I told him, I said, “You know what?” I was getting ready to leave to go home, I says, “Call me what you wanna call me, but just do me one favor, don’t call me a Pancho. Cause all you people think that every Mexican—that we’re Pancho’s standing up against a cactus, drinking tequila, that that’s who we are. We’re not.” He says okay. So when I went home, I went home on my—back then we had Kelly days which is our day off. Came back like four days later. Every piece of equipment I had, my locker and everything had the name Chico and I says, uh.

He says, “Look don’t get offended by the name Chico. Number one, you are the smallest.” I don’t know how he found out that I was. He says, “You are the smallest in the department at 5’7.” He says, “And if I’m correct, Chico stands for small.” I said, “Yeah.” He says, “From now on, you’re Chico. So, from this day forward your name is Chico Rodriguez.” Okay. (laughs). That’s how Chico Rodriguez was born and everybody within the city of South Bend, you talked to the politicians, called me by name, they have to think. Say Chico, boom they know exactly who you’re talking about. That’s how I was born under the Chico name.

[GG] I always thought it was part of “Federico.”

[VC] I did too.

[GG] That’s my—that’s what I presumed.

01:59:54 [FR] A lot of people presume that and my mural at the restaurant—that came about that I came (inaudible) they brought it a year and a half after I opened up, he says, “Hey, let me put a mural on your wall.” I’m like what are you gonna put so he showed me a bunch of pictures and I said, “I like this picture, this picture, this picture, this picture.” And he said, well, he says, “Which one would you want me to put?” I said, “All of them! Give me a piece of all of them. Can you do that?” He says, “That’s uh, I’ve never tried that but venture for me.” And that’s how that mural was made. Everybody thinks I’m leaning up against an air condition you know, with a cup of coffee, but I’m on a horse. Believe it or not, you put my face up there, put my face up there. he says, “I can’t make faces of humans for real but I will give it a shot.” And then he put my - the wife that I was married to back then, he put her, and then my son who’s 26 years old now, he’s hiding behind her dress sticking his head out. So, he put the family.

[GG] Does—the customers when it first started out, was it mostly?

[FR] Polish.

[GG] Mostly Polish.

[FR] Yeah.

[GG] And then it transitioned into mostly Hispanic?

02:01:18 [FR] To be honest with you, I have Chico’s Mexican American restaurant, I have a lot—and the reason I say that is because Monday to Thursday I have a lot of polish white people come in and African Americans mainly. I have some Hispanics but mainly it’s the white and the African American Monday through Thursday. Friday, Saturdays I have mainly Hispanics come in. Yeah, weird.

[GG] Why do you think that is?

[FR] I think we’re weekend eaters. Aren’t we? We’re weekend eaters. We don’t eat in the middle of the week, we take lunch. We all carry a lunch but then weekends—and I found out this from my wife. My wife says, “Just for your information,” and this happened about 10 years. She says, when we were sweethearts and all that, you know we’re still sweethearts, but you know everything works out after a while, you know when we were madly in love with each other she used to cook for me regardless of the day. Now she says, “I don’t cook on Friday, Saturday or Sundays, so if you’re hungry you make what you wanna make or you go out and eat.” And I’m wondering If that has anything to do with it. Not only does my wife do that,

a lot of Hispanic women started doing that nowadays they don't cook on weekends. So, we go out and eat.

02:02:39 [GG] I'm wondering how it feels, you started about—you talked about uh, starting your life, it was majority Hispanic. Almost everybody in your life was steeped in that culture and as time went on it became less and less and less. So, by the time you went to high school you started losing those connections, by the time you joined the fire department you were literally the only person. But now um, you're—have a business in a place that is growing more and more and more Hispanic, again does it feel—how does it feel?

[FR] To be honest with you um, now in today's age the people out there its like we need guidance I feel like. We need guidance because—and I told this to Sam believe it or not.

[GG] Sam Centellas?

02:03:27 [FR] Yeah, I feel that our people right now—we wanna unite, we don't know how to unite, and we have yet to come up with a person or a person come up to us and say "look, believe in me." You know? That kind of an individual, we don't have that. I feel like we have organizations out there but it seems like every organization—we're stepping on each other's toes and we're—as we keep moving forward you know, the organizations, who's in charge? You know, when politics come into play, you know to me that's always been my thing for the last 47 years that I've been on the fire department. My deal is that we need, this way we never gonna succeed this way, never. You can hit that wall with your fingers, you're gonna break them. Hit the wall like this and you're gonna make a dent in that way.

[GG] Making a fist.

[FR] My point is that we need to come together as all these organizations that we got out here that are helping the people, we need to come together and believe that if you tell me consider voting for this individual because... I should consider it, if I don't like him then maybe I should do some homework and find out why are you supporting them. That's what I feel. If we don't do that we still, I feel we need to come together. Really do the things that—and what I told Sam, I said, "Sam you'd be the perfect person to lead this." And I think he would.

02:05:17 (Coughs) Excuse me, I really think he would. Because Sam is active. Sam is involved. Sam is everywhere. But, Sam used to get us together, and when I say us—I consider myself as a person in the community, am I a

leader? People think because of my position I am, I think well I'll give you advice and anything and everything that I know, uh does that make me a leader? Well how can I make her believe that how important it is for her to be actively involved? That's a leader to me, if I can get her to get involved.

[GG] Speaking of, do you have any other questions that I—

[VC] I think you're good.

[GG] Thank you so much.

02:06:05 [Audio ends]